

How to Manage Your Negative Emotions

Buddhist Guidelines



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Emotions are “exciting or moving” moments of one’s mind of both positive and negative nature. Generally they arise in relation to a stimulus. When those internal states are strong enough to initiate mental, verbal or physical activities, they are called motivations.

What are negative emotions?

Mental states that bring about affliction are negative emotions. Mental states can be afflictive in two senses, i.e. afflictive for oneself and afflictive for others.

Emotions are generally judged in the West as good or bad according to their usefulness in structuring social life. Happiness, sadness, love, friendship, forgiveness, gratitude, regret, guilt and shame are considered as positive since they contribute to better interpersonal relationships. Whereas anger, contempt, indignation and fear are considered negative since they tend to break down the social fabric.

Buddhist view of emotion takes both social and personal or inner aspects into consideration in judging emotions as good and bad. It seems that Buddhism place far more importance on effects of mental states towards oneself. Therefore, Buddhism views negative or destructive emotions as something that bring affliction to those who have them. Particularly, mental states are regarded as negative

- 1) because they impair our judgment, our ability to make a correct assessment of the nature of things., prevents the mind from ascertaining reality as it is, causing a gap between the way things appear and the way things are.

2) because they cause you to experience less happiness, less well-being, less lucidity and freedom, and more distortion

For instance, Buddhists view desire, or excessive attachment, as destructive because it makes it impossible for us to see a balance between the pleasant and the unpleasant. Instead, we view the object of our desire or attachment as one hundred percent attractive. Aversion, on the other hand, blinds us to some of the positive qualities of the object, causing us to feel one hundred percent negative toward that object, wishing to repel, destroy, or run away from it.

There is a long list of negative emotions found in Buddhist discourses. However, they can be classified into three categories, i.e. greed, hatred and delusion. Very common negative emotions that we experience are desire, attachment, or craving; hatred, anger, ill will; confusion, ignorance, or delusion; pride, conceit and jealousy. In addition, the mental states of afflictive doubt and afflictive views are considered destructive.

The Pali word, Kilesa appears as the common term in the Buddhist texts to refer to “unwholesome” emotions. It means defilements. The mental states that defile the mind are named so. Āsava is also another term used to refer to negative emotions. Particularly, Āsava refers to the active mood of negative emotions. Āsava literary means “flowing towards” which implies “thoughts flowing towards” with a certain force when conducive stimulus are available. This term implies that negative emotions are not inherent in us but “flows towards” us on account of a stimulus or an event based on our response to it. Āsava are four types.

Kāmāsava: unwholesome emotions related to sensual pleasure

Bhavāsava: unwholesome emotions related to becoming

Avijjāsava: unwholesome emotions related to ignorance

Diṭṭhāsava: unwholesome emotions related to dogmas

Anusaya is another important term in the discussion of negative emotions. It refers to unwholesome subtle emotions lie in the unconsciousness. It reveals sleeping or dormant layer of emotions. They are explained as deep rooted tendencies, proclivities of human personality. Anusaya are six types.

Rāgānusaya: latent tendency of lust

Paṭighānusaya: latent tendency of rejection or hatred

Diṭṭhānusaya: latent tendency of dogmas

Vicikicchānusaya: latent tendency of skepticism

Mānānusaya: latent tendency of conceit

Bhavarāgānusaya: latent tendency of clinging to existence

Avijjānusaya: latent tendency of ignorance

The former term emphasizes the activation of these emotional phenomena on the occasion of the sensory experience and the latter term emphasizes their dispositional nature.

Managing Negative Emotions

There are two common ways of responding to negative emotions, that is, 1) blind expression and 2) suppression. When certain negative emotions arise in our mind we will either express them outwardly or will suppress them inwardly. In Buddhist viewpoint both of these common responses are not successful with regard to negative emotions. When we blindly express them, we will do harm to others or create problems in our social life. Buddhism further shows that when we express negative emotions again and again, they become strong in our mind. Our mind creates tendencies to have them often. The more we express them more they come to our mind. That will create more frustration to the person.

When we suppress negative emotions they will create other personality problems within oneself. Those suppressed emotions will create turbulence within one's personality which is going to be more harmful for both oneself and others. Furthermore, in Buddhist viewpoint, suppression of negative emotions is a missing of an opportunity to understand them. That will keep us blind to the actual nature of negative emotions. Then negative emotions will continue to dominate the individual.

Buddhist method of dealing with negative emotions is neither blind expression nor the unwise suppression but the managing them with understanding. Buddhism advises us to be aware of nature of emotions and to train to watch them when we have them. Then we may transform them. We may decide to not to act out of them with an understanding or to express them in a different way after transforming them. This is called "managing" negative emotions.

Buddhist teaching offers an integrated approach to manage emotions. Since emotions are seen as complex phenomena, various techniques are given to address different factors that give rise to emotions. Those techniques can be divided into mainly two parts.

1. Preventive measures
2. Remedial or curative measures

Preventive Measure

Perspectival Change

Buddhist method proposes a change in one's perspective of oneself as the most important preventive measure. Egoistic perspective is regarded as the root for many negative emotions. Buddhism sees a close relationship between wrong cognitions and negative emotions. All unwholesome states of mind are preceded by egoistic perspective which is, according to Buddhism, a wrong view. Buddhism advises us to see ego as a construct which does correspond to reality. Buddhism admits an empirical self, but cautions that self is not real in the way we used to consider. Although "I" appears, it does not exist in the way it appears.

When we loose a strict ego sense within us, we interpret our experiences in a very different way. Many experiences may not disturb us as they did

earlier. Then we will be able to move away from unnecessary negative emotions.

The Sabbasava Sutta, the Discourse on All the Taints (MN 1, 7) shows the complex nature of emotions and preventive strategies to overcome negative emotions. The Sutta emphasizes the importance of a perspectival change to overcome negative emotions. The Sutta elaborates how negative emotions arise in an ordinary person's mind when he thinks and ruminates in ego-centric perspective. "By attending to things unfit for attention and by not attending to things fit for attention, both unarisen taints arise in him and arisen taints increase." The things unfit for attention are various ways of imagining and confirming the view of ego. The things fit for attention, according to the Sutta, are seeing experiences as they arise without an ego-centric perspective. This radical change of viewpoint in appreciating one's experiences results in a shift from egocentricity to detachment and moving away from negative emotions to positive ones.

Restraint

The Sutta also shows that restraining senses and keeping oneself away from situations that provoke negative emotions are also as methods of overcoming them. These steps belong to the practice of morality. By keeping certain principles and precepts in life one can protect oneself from the circumstances that are vulnerable for the arising of negative emotions.

Distancing Emotions

We generally identify emotions with ourselves. (I am angry) We feel emotions as real, sometimes, more than actual experiences. But in reality emotions are mental states appear and disappear from moment to moment. They are not inherent part of consciousness. Buddhism advises to see emotions as momentary mental states and dis-identify them with ourselves.

Buddhism admits that human beings possess six senses (not five) to relate to the world. The structure of six senses facilitates to create a fresh view on emotions.

Eye → Visual objects

Ear → Sounds

Nose → Smells

Tongue → Tastes

Body → Touches

Mind → Thoughts/Emotions

Emotions are just as same as visual forms that we see and sounds that we hear. They are not necessarily part of us. They come and go just as visual forms and sounds come and go. We do not regard what we hear or what we see as ours. We should train ourselves to regard our thoughts or emotions in the same manner. They are just one category of sensory objects. Then we do not feel emotions as a part of ourselves or more real than other things. With this understanding we will be able to watch our emotions without

being overwhelmed by them. When we create this distance, it is easy for us to decide how to response to them. We can make informed decisions on our emotions rather than reacting blindly to them.

Cultivating Positive Emotions

Cultivation of positive emotions with personal effort is also regarded as a successful preventive method in which one can replace negative emotions with positive ones. Purposefully developing a calm state of mind reduces the effect of unwholesome emotion to one's life. The Sabbasava Sutta points out that one should develop seven factors of enlightenment, i.e. mindfulness, investigation of mental states, the effort, the rapture, the tranquility, the concentration, and the equanimity. With the development of enlightenment factors and mental states of "sublime abodes", i.e. unconditioned love, compassion, sympathetic joy, the individual will elevate himself to a happier state where he is completely free from all the disturbances of negative emotions.¹

Remedial Measures

These are the techniques that help us to manage emotions when we have them. Preventive measures prepare ourselves to overcome negative emotions before they disturb us. Having a training in preventive methods helps one to transform negative emotions or at least to reduce the weight of negative emotions. However, when we are already under the influence of negative emotions, we should know how to handle them. Buddhism also provides practical tips to deal with them. The Vitakka Santhana Sutta, Discourse on the Removal of Distracting Thoughts (MN I, 188) proposes five gradual techniques to overcome existing negative emotions. One should utilize these techniques in a gradual manner. The first technique should be utilized first. Then you may be able to overcome the disturbances of negative emotion. Only if it fails he may proceed to utilize the second one. One may proceed until the last technique only if the preceding technique fails.

- I. Replacing the disturbing thought with another thought
"Giving attention to some other sign connected with what is wholesome."

Simile: Just like a skilled carpenter might knock out, remove, and extract a coarse peg by means of a fine one.

- II. Contemplating consequences

¹ The Sabbasava Sutta explains altogether 7 methods of overcoming taints: by seeing (dassanā), by restraining (saṅvarā), by using (paṇisevanā), by enduring (adhivāsanā), by avoiding (vinodanā), by removing (parivajjanā), by cultivating (bhāvanā)

“Examining the danger in those thoughts thus: ‘Those thoughts are unwholesome, reprehensible, resulting in suffering.’”

Simile: Just as a young man or a woman, fond of ornaments, would be humiliated and disgusted if he or she realized that a carcass of a snake is hung around his or her neck.

III. Disregarding the thought

‘Should try to forget those thoughts and should not give attention to them’ Do not entertain them.

Simile: Just as a man with good eyes who did not want to see objects that had come within range of sight would either shut his eye or look away.

IV. Analyzing the origin and causes of thought

“Should reflect on the thought- formation of those thoughts”

Simile: Just as a man walking fast might consider: “Why am I walking fast ? What if I walk slowly? and he would walk slowly; then he might consider: “Why am I walking slowly? What if I stand?” and he would stand.....”Why am I standing? What if I sit?”...Why am I sitting? What if I lie down” and he would lie down. By doing so he would substitute for each grosser posture one that was subtler.

V. Using strong will power with physiological changes

‘With his teeth clenched and his tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth, he beats down, constrains, and crushes mind with mind”

Simile: Just as a strong man might seize a weaker man by the head or shoulders and beat him down, constrain him, crush him.

The above techniques are immensely helpful for today humanity to make their everyday lives peaceful and happy. In modern context where people have wider network and higher expectations, they need higher skills to deal with the issues of life. Most importantly, they should be ready face the fast phase of change happening around us. Buddhism with the above techniques provides practical guidelines to deal with their emotional life make their modern living more satisfying.

Genuine well-being in Buddhism is not a state that is contingent on the presence of pleasurable stimuli, either external or internal but an achievement through an inner transformation. It results from freeing the mind from negative emotions, cultivating mental balance and realizing one’s fullest potential in terms of wisdom, compassion, and creativity.

Buddhism admits that one can utilize his power of will to transform his or her habitual patterns of attentional, conative and emotional spheres. Human being is not a victim, forever, of his own prolonged patterns of thought and emotions. He can be free from unwanted negative emotions and directs him for the cultivation of mental balance. Indeed this cultivation involves a sustained training. The above techniques, when put in to practice in one's daily life, bring the mental balance which is essential in achieving genuine happiness and well-being.